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# THE MUSICAL AMATEUR



ON PIANO-PLAYING.



THREE things go to make a perfect piano-player; three things, that is, outside of God-given talent, which cannot be acquired. These three things are "tone," "velocity," and "clearness." From a long and careful study of the great pianists who have visited our coun-

try, I have come to the conclusion that any two of these can be acquired, but that the three together are never found, and are perhaps unattainable. Rubinstein had "tone" and "velocity," but not "clearness;" Von Bülow, "velocity" and "clearness," but not "tone;" Essipoff, the same as Von Bülow; Rummel, the same as Rubinstein (whom as a pianist he greatly resembles); Joseffy, the same as Von Bülow (with the addition of poetry, which Von Bülow lacked); our own S. B. Mills has "tone" and "clearness," but not "velocity." I have been vehemently fought by Mills' friends on this latter statement, but it is easily susceptible of proof. Let any one metronomize a composition performed by Joseffy, for example, and the same as rendered by Mills; and it will be found that Mills is from one seventh to one fifth slower in his "tempi" than Joseffy. Mills' large "tone" deceives the ear into believing that he uses more velocity than he does; it so fills the air and binds the notes of a passage together that it produces the impression of velocity without the fact.

Of course, in using the terms "tone," "velocity," and "clearness," I use them in their most extreme sense; I mean in each case the acme of "tone," of "velocity," of "clearness." And when I say that even a great pianist can have but two of the three, I mean he can have but two in perfection; he would be no great pianist if he had not also a large proportion of the third element.

Now, our amateur pianists usually make the mistake of sacrificing all things to "velocity;" the exceptions are rare. And in their strivings after this end, "tone" suffers considerably, and "clearness" is generally sacrificed entirely.

The causes of this fault are various. First in order comes, undoubtedly, the abominable work dignified by the name of "teaching," and doled out to misguided pupils at starvation rates by a crowd of needy men and women, either untaught themselves or careless of their pupils. The finest teacher in the world could not afford to undergo the nerve and brain wear necessarily resulting from honest and analytical teaching for the eight, ten, or fifteen dollars per quarter charged by these worse than charlatans. Worse, because hopeless; and hopeless because their very

ignorance makes it impossible to show them that they are ignorant. Next comes the generally received impression that a cheap teacher and cheap instrument (and "cheap" in both these cases means always "bad") will do for a pupil to begin with. It seems impossible to make people see that the beginning is the very time when the best of both should be provided. As well might one undertake to erect a good house upon a bad foundation as to make a good player out of one badly taught at the commencement. If a good teacher is a luxury which can only be indulged in for a short time, by all means have that luxury to start with. After eight or ten quarters from a really good teacher, the pupil should be able to continue with comparatively little assistance; at any rate, a good position of fingers, hands, and arms will by that time have become so much a second nature that the pupil will be in little danger of losing it. As for the instrument, there are enough difficulties in the path of a beginner without unnecessarily increasing them by providing him with bad material to work on. The first steps in piano-playing are heart-breaking and patience-trying enough under the most advantageous circumstances, and it is the height of folly to make them more so.

A third cause may be found in the unwise impatience of the parents and friends of the pupil; and the better and more thorough the teacher, the more he will suffer from this. This is a point on which I speak feelingly, for I have gone through many a disagreeable experience from this cause alone. At one time I became roused to such a pitch of determination by unwise interference and complaints that I refused to accept any beginner unless bound to me for three years; and the few who accepted this condition found no cause for complaint when the stipulated time had passed. Parents and friends very naturally cannot see either the intention or the results of continued scale and exercise practice. "Susan Smith plays the 'Maiden's Prayer,' and she has only had two quarters' lessons; my child has been studying a year and you give her only one or two pieces, and they are so easy that there is no show about them." It is in vain that the teacher responds that he does not want his pupil to play the "Maiden's Prayer," and that if he did he would not give it to her yet, for she is not ready for it. In vain does he point out that the simple pieces his pupil plays are performed with finish, with good tone and in good taste, whereas Miss Smith's execution of the "Maiden's Prayer" is truly an "execution" in the wrong sense of the word. All this the parent cannot see. Miss Smith makes a show and her child does not. What is the teacher to do? If he be a poor man, whose bread and butter depend upon the immediate pecuniary results of his teaching, he must give way; the pupil is spoilt, the teacher misjudged by those who know, and the parent beholds the ruin of what might have been a good pianist with satisfaction and pride.

A fourth cause lies in the pupils themselves. As I have already said, the beginnings of a proper study of the piano are tiring, uninteresting, and exacting; and the student has frequently to spend weeks on studies the use or aim of which he cannot be made to understand. As a natural consequence they are slighted, or entirely neglected, while the pupil scrambles through the more melodious of his exercises, or through pieces surreptitiously obtained and carefully hidden from the knowledge of the teacher, who, unless he has had experience enough to open his eyes to this favorite deception of impatient pupils, wonders how it is that his carefully taught and apparently industrious scholar makes such very slow progress. Here is where the parent *should* step in and give to the teacher the aid of his influence.

A pupil must frequently be content to study in faith a great deal of which he cannot at present see the use. It is not interesting nor amusing to spend every day fifty minutes in slowly and patiently raising a single finger and letting it fall over and over again;

carefully watching at each repetition the position of the hand and arm and the action and continued flexibility of the muscles. Yet this is a necessary—an indispensable—study. Five minutes on each finger of each hand makes fifty minutes; and at least five minutes should be spent on each finger.

Five-finger exercises, scale practice, and octave practice contain the elements of all good piano-playing; but they are all very uninteresting until a pupil has got far enough to analyze and appreciate his own gradual improvement. Until that time arrives, he must be content to do them as a necessary but unpalatable bit of daily labor.

Finally, and above all things, practise slowly, *very* slowly. No matter how rapidly a composition is intended to be performed, the practice on it must be slow; indeed, the more rapid the intended performance, the slower and more carefully analytic must be the preliminary practice. It is from the neglect of this important rule that we get the muddy runs, uneven passages, and weak trills of our great body of amateur pianists. It is needless to say that every mark of "forte" or "piano," "accelerando" or "ritardando," accent or pause, made by the composer must be rigidly obeyed. *First* get these so thoroughly practised into your piece with the notes that you unconsciously obey them as you play; *then* form your conception of the composition, incorporating these marks; and, if Heaven has intended you for a tone-poet, your performance will then be one of those which make of music a language at once too beautiful and too definite for words.

C. F.



WITHOUT doubt there is considerable dissatisfaction with the Mapleson operatic troupe this year; bitter complaints are made that the public are asked to pay "Nilsson prices" for inferior singers. Why "Nilsson" prices? This complaint shows the wide misapprehension that

obtains here on all musical matters. It is undoubtedly quite true that there is no artist in the troupe as sensationally attractive as the much over-appreciated Mme. Nilsson of some seasons ago, or the equally overrated Mme. Gerster of last year; but an opera cannot be honestly represented by any one person, or two, any more than a fine and just performance of a great orchestral work could be given with one good first violin and a surrounding of botchers who can hardly hold their instruments. The "star" business is not only overdone: it should never be done at all—at least in so high a branch of art as opera.

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The company now at the Academy of Music is one well fitted to give opera in a manner thoroughly satisfactory to every musician and to every judicious person; for it is able to give that most important of all points, a perfect *ensemble*. The principals (with, perhaps, one exception) are artistic, painstaking, and fully up to the requirements of every part yet entrusted to them; the seconds are as good as the principals who supported the much-quoted Nilsson; some of them are indeed better, as witness Mme. Lablache, and the chorus and orchestra are excellent in material, thoroughly well trained, and under most competent conductorship. Rehearsals are not spared,